

A Contagious Message

John 15:9-17

For many years there has been a story that has been told in various places and in many forms. Whatever the actual origin, it serves as a moving illustration to begin our fifth message in our series on “Developing a Contagious Faith.” From today’s passage in **John 15:9-17** we will look at the topic of a contagious message. Turn there with me.

In her book titled *Bird by Bird*, author Anne Lamott relates this moving story. An eight year old boy had a younger sister who was dying of leukemia, and he was told that she would die if she did not receive a blood transfusion. His parents explained to him that his blood was probably compatible with hers, and if so, he could be the blood donor. They asked their son if he would allow them to have his blood tested. He agreed and after the results came back found that he was in fact a good match. Discussing the options with their son, they explained that if he gave his sister a pint of blood, it could be her last chance of living. It was a lot to take in for an eight year old and he asked if he could think about it overnight.

The next day he went to his parents and said he was willing to donate the necessary blood to his sister. So they took him to the hospital where he was put on a gurney beside his six year old sister. Both of them were hooked up to IVs. Moments later a nurse withdrew a pint of blood from the boy, which was then put in the IV of his sister. The boy lay on his gurney in silence while the blood dripped into her arm. A doctor came over to the side of the boy to see how he was doing. The boy opened his eyes and asked, “How soon until I die?”

Ponder that story for a moment and consider the powerful picture of self-sacrificing love that it portrays. We are all inspired by acts of heroic selflessness. At the recent bombing during the Boston Marathon, spectators and volunteers alike

rushed to aid victims – fellow runners and spectators – Moms and Dads, brothers and sisters, friends and co-workers. Recall the heroic efforts of teachers at Sandy Hook elementary or as far back as 9/11 when the World Trade Centers were about to collapse how police and firemen rushed into burning buildings to help as many escape as possible.

Somewhere right now someone may be risking their life to rescue someone else who is in trouble, perhaps even a total stranger.

Read **John 15:13** with me aloud – **“Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends.”**

With cameras included in phones and instant streaming it doesn’t take long for those pictures to emerge on Youtube or Network news as a news alert from anywhere in the world. As heroic and noteworthy as many stories are, worthy of making news headlines, there is no story as moving or more powerful than that of Jesus Himself, who demonstrated the power of His words by willingly laying down His life for the sake of us, His friends

Last week we considered our story, the story we have to tell others about our conversion and the change that has taken place in us since becoming a follower of Jesus. Today we want to take a look at God’s story, the story of His great love for us. Our focus in on that 2,000 year old message of hope, love, forgiveness, and everlasting life that is possible through Jesus Christ. It is a contagious message that we call the gospel. I say that it is contagious because no other message has withstood the test of time and remained intact, no other message has withstood such great opposition, no other message continues to call individuals to a transformed life that takes place both here and now and for eternity. I say it’s contagious because no other message has had such a global impact through its reach around the world.

Though we have heard it before we need to discuss it again to get a real grasp on what that message is and what it means. In two weeks we will be concluding this series with taking a look at God's contagious love. We will walk through a simple diagram that can be used in presenting this good news that comes from God.

For Christmas one year when we were much younger, we received a basic microscope set. It came with different slides that could be placed under the microscope to look at objects. Maybe you remember doing that in biology class. I remember pricking the finger and putting a drop of blood on the glass and sliding it on the little tray. Then putting an eye up to the lens you would adjust the knob until the object came into view.

As we consider this act of Jesus laying down His life for His friends we want to put four key characters on the glass of our spiritual microscope. These are the four primary players in God's redemptive drama. By taking a look at each of the four key characters we will gain clarity on what the Bible reveals to us about each one. This will give us a good overview of the central message of the Christian faith. It is foundational both to our understanding of what we believe and our ability to clearly articulate it to others.

So, let's roll up our sleeves, engage our mind, and if possible, I encourage you to take some notes. Whether this is review or not it is still "good stuff" as Uncle Johnnie used to say. But let me say that out of all the Bible teaches, there is perhaps no more important topic anywhere, nor one more essential to helping you become a contagious Christian.

Here are the four key characters in God's redemptive plan: God, Us, Christ, You.

I. KEY CHARACTER #1 – GOD

A. God Is Loving

Because it is His plan from the beginning, God is the obvious person to start. One of the central themes throughout Scripture is that God loves us and wants to have a personal relationship with us. If we are going to understand the gospel message and convey it to others, we need to understand that God loves us. That is very clear from even the first chapters of the Bible. It is very evident to me that we were created unique from all the rest of God's creation. While each form of God's creation is in itself unique, we were created to have a relationship with God. We were created to interact with the Creator. We were created to be in a relationship with Him.

We are most familiar with His love through **John 3:16** when Jesus describing to Nicodemus that without being born again no one can enter the kingdom of God. Then in a summary of the gospel Jesus explains the beginning of the gospel by stating that **"God so loved the world..." (John 3:16)**

In **Jeremiah 31:3** God proclaims **"I have loved you with an everlasting love; I have drawn you with loving-kindness."**

If we ever have doubted God's love, we need only turn to **Romans 5:8** which emphatically and eloquently points out that **"God demonstrated His love for us..."**

Have you thought about God's great love lately? Dr. David Jeremiah has written a book titled *GOD LOVES YOU – He always has – He always will.* He writes that "This is the most important fact in your life. The eternal, self-existing being who created and sustains everything that exists dearly loves you. The profound thought of it should begin and end your every day. It should define your every goal, your every action. And the fact that He loves everyone you know should inspire you to see others as He does and transform every relationship you have."

Dr. Jeremiah further notes that the Bible very simply states that “God is love.”

He loves you even when you don’t love Him.

His love never stops.

He loved you before you were born.

He loves you even when He corrects you.

He wrote his love in red.

His love will never let you go.

As a matter of fact, we read in **Romans 8:39** that **“nothing is able to separate us (the believer) from the love of God.”**

I hope you realize that God loving us is a good thing. It’s out of His compassion that He made us and wants to have a relationship with us even when we have messed things up or don’t want to pursue a relationship with Him right now. God’s love pursues us and tells us in so many ways that we matter to Him. We matter to Him for eternity.

I think most people would say that God is love, even if they may not go to church. But many would want to leave it right there thinking, as J.B. Phillips explains in his book *Your God Is Too Small*, that we have the tendency to reduce God to something He is not and try to turn Him into something we want Him to be. If people can view Him as merely a warm and benevolent force for good, then that feels comfortable and safe.

The problem is that in the Bible God is revealed with other characteristics. God is not only loving, He is also Holy.

B. God Is Holy

I Peter 1:16 admonishes us to **“be holy, because I am holy.”**

Throughout **Psalm 99** God’s holiness is declared.

There are scenes written in both Isaiah and Revelation of angels calling out that God is holy.

(Isaiah 6:2-3; Revelation 4:8)

Habakkuk 1:13 “Your eyes are too pure to look on evil; you cannot tolerate wrong.”

God is absolutely pure and separate from everything that is impure.

Billy Graham tells of a time when he was to be interviewed in his home for a well-known television program. Knowing that it would be on national television, they took great pains to make sure everything was clean and nice – including vacuuming and dusting the entire house, especially the living room where the interview was to take place. By the time the TV crew arrived, they felt everything was spic and span, but then the powerful television lights were turned on and suddenly they could see cobwebs and dust where they had never seen them before under normal room lights.

We try to clean up our lives and convince ourselves we have them in order and under normal lighting our lives tend to look really good. Moral flaws may not even show up. But when we see them in the brilliant light of God’s holiness, the many cobwebs, faults, and imperfections of our life will suddenly be revealed with embarrassing clarity. John would write that God is light. God is love. God is holy.

C. God Is Just

Romans 3:25-26

Because He is just, He is like a good judge who must deal with our faults. Because He is just, as **Bill Hybels notes, “He cannot wink at a broken law. He must mete out justice.”**

A number of years ago in Scotland a man murdered a family member. By the time he was brought to trial, the softhearted judge declared he’d punished himself enough already and let him go free. You can guess how the public responded. They said it

wasn't fair. They wanted, demanded justice. They called for a new judge to replace him and who would uphold the law.

But why is it that when we break God's law, we want Him to be the loving judge and forgive our infractions without justice?

God loves us and wants to have a relationship with us, but He is also holy and just, and as the perfect judge He must dispense justice to everyone fairly.

II. KEY CHARACTER #2 – US

The Bible makes it clear that when God first created humans, He made us good, without sin. Something happened though to change that.

A. We Became Sinful

Isaiah 53:6 says we have strayed like sheep.

Romans 3:10 says there isn't anyone who is righteous.

Romans 3:23 says we have all sinned.

The first man and woman abused their freedom and rebelled against God and became sinful. What they did has continued right on down to every one of us. No one is exempt. God in His justice has to do something with that sin and rebellion. It must be judged.

B. We Deserve Death

Romans 6:23

Again Bill Hybels writes "God's holiness exposes us for what we are and His justice deals fairly with the sin we've committed."

The penalty according to the Bible is death. It is experienced both in physical death and spiritual death. Physical death is the termination of this life where our body ceases to function, to live, breath

and so. It is the separation of the body from the spirit. Spiritual death also means separation, separation between us and God forever in a real place called hell. That is a steep payment for sin, but it is the penalty or debt that is required.

If that news isn't bad enough, there is even more bad news.

C. We Are Spiritually Helpless

There isn't anything we can do ourselves to change this grim picture. One way to look at it is that when we sinned, we incurred a moral debt. We are morally bankrupt having nothing in our moral bank accounts from which we can pay off that debt. Oh, we try.

We try by being as good as we can.

We try by being religious.

We try by being benevolent and kind.

We try so many ways, but the Bible again says that they all fall short of what is required. They can't make us perfect.

Ephesians 2:8 says we aren't saved by anything we do. That indeed is a bleak picture. Hard as we try it will never be enough.

Let's say you're out with a bunch of friends swimming around in the ocean. A friend of yours continues to throw out a lifeline to you, but you're having a good time and don't feel like you're in any real danger. But then your friend shouts out that there are a bunch of sharks circling around you. Instantly your desire for the lifeline changes.

Noah tried for over 100 years to throw a lifeline to the people around him, but no one believed that judgment was coming until it was too late.

The same is true of the gospel. People need to understand the hard to hear news about their sin and the spiritual predicament they're in before they'll become very interested in the solution you offer

through Christ and the payment He made for us on the cross. Until they know and believe they have a problem, they will not want or seek a remedy. Sometimes the most loving thing we can do is to impress on our friend the bad news.

As bad as the bad news is there is good news.

III. KEY CHARACTER #3 – CHRIST

Christ is uniquely qualified and able to solve the problem of our sin.

A. He Is God

Christ was a man, human like you and I, but He is also God, God in the flesh. He was more than just a holy man or great teacher. He is God. He is man.

John 1:1, 14 attests to the fact of His being both God and man, speaking to His deity and humanity. **“In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God...And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.”**

NLT “In the beginning the Word already existed. He was with God, and He was God...So the Word became human and lived here on earth among us. He was full of unfailing love and faithfulness. And we have seen His glory, the glory of the only Son of the Father.”

As God, He had the authority and power to devise a plan for our salvation. As man, He was able to execute the plan by taking upon Himself the punishment we deserved.

B. He Died As Our Substitute

This is the central truth of the Gospel, that He died as our substitute. This substitution has already occurred. It is the key concept of the gospel

message. He paid the spiritual death penalty debt that we owed because He took our place.

I Peter 3:18 “Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God.”

By becoming our substitute He expressed the love of God, upheld the holiness of God, and satisfied the justice of God.

C. He Offers His Forgiveness And Lordship As A Gift

Ephesians 2:8-9

His substitutionary death was a gift to us done voluntarily on His part. The need was there and He volunteered. He was the only one who could. Others may nobly attempt to do the same, but it will always be to no avail, because we are flawed, sinful, Christ was perfect, sinless. That’s the payment God demanded. We don’t deserve it, we can’t earn it, we didn’t pay for it. The word we use to describe His action of substitution and payment is grace. It means a free, undeserved gift. The only way we can receive it is to humbly bow before Christ, admit our sin, and say yes to His indescribable gift.

When we do that, our sin-debt is paid in full and we receive God’s promise of eternal life in heaven. We also gain the ongoing companionship of God Himself, who will be there to lead us, guide us, and lovingly bring us correction when we need it.

*He paid a debt He did not owe
I owed a debt I could not pay
I needed someone to wash my sins away
And now I sing a brand new song
Amazing Grace, all day long
Christ Jesus paid the debt
That I could never pay*

Author Unknown

But someone may ask, “**Why couldn’t God just forgive and forget like we can?**”

Suppose you have a brand new car parked in the parking lot and the guy in the car next to you is in a hurry to leave the service and he accidentally smashes into your car. When he seeks you out and apologizes for what happened, you can just forgive him and release him from any responsibility of paying for the damages, right? If you can forgive and forget, why can’t God?

We owe God a debt for our sin. If God would just forgive and forget then no one would need to make any payment for that debt. Do you see the problem with that logic? In the case of the dented car, you still have a dented car. You let the guy who dented the car off the hook, but who is going to pay for the dent? Because of your generosity or love or whatever, you are the one left not only with the damage, but also the repair bill.

We’ve done spiritual damage by sinning against God. He too was willing to freely give us His forgiveness and restore a relationship with us. But He still had to pay for the damage. He was left holding the bill. In this case the debt is the death penalty. He willingly paid by coming as one of us and dying on the cross in our place.

So why did Christ have to pay the penalty? Why did Jesus, who was sinless, suffer instead of me? It doesn’t make sense to us that God would take out His anger on His innocent Son. It would be like you having a bad day at work and you going home and taking out your frustrations on your own child or spouse.

In medieval days they had what was called “the whipping boy.” When a young member of the royal family broke the rules, the child’s teacher did not discipline the royal child. Instead, they would whip a slave boy in front of him. They hoped to make the young prince feel bad enough to reform his

ways and stay in line by observing someone else get punished for his wrongs.

Going back to our car illustration, it would be like you forgiving and releasing the person who dented the car from any debt, but then you grabbing the next person on the sidewalk and demanding that they pay for the damages. They probably wouldn’t.

Christ is not some reluctant bystander who was forced by God unwillingly to be the divine whipping boy who would take our punishment. According to **Philippians 2:6-8**, Christ took on Himself the nature of a servant, made in the likeness of man. In this nature He humbled Himself and became obedient to death, even death on the cross. As we pointed out this death was in substitution for us. Someone had to pay. Willingly Christ did.

Matthew 20:28 says that the mission of Christ was to “**give His life as a ransom for many.**” That means He intentionally came to lay down His life as the payment for our sins.

We sinned against God. We are guilty. We come to Him and admit our wrongs and humbly ask His forgiveness. He forgives us and sets us free from the debt we owe Him for our sins, then He willingly pays the debt with the blood of His Son.

Jesus is saying “I paid your penalty, will you trust Me and follow Me?”

This brings us to our final key character in the redemption plan.

IV. KEY CHARACTER #4 – YOU

The proverbial ball is in our court. The price for our debt has been paid and we need to act. It’s up to each of us individually to respond. There is not what some people call universal salvation where everyone eventually earns salvation and gains

heaven. Jesus paid the price for the whole world, but each of us must respond.

A. We Must Respond

His gift is not automatically applied to us. We must receive it. We need to act.

Robyn recently had to fly to Denver for a business trip. Weeks before the event she received an email with travel arrangements and information that her flight ticket was paid for. Now she could have gone to the airport and stood in the terminal and watched the airplanes come and go and even believe in the science of aviation. But that would not get her to Denver. She had to put her understanding into action by climbing on board the plane herself.

It's the same with salvation. We must do more than nod our heads in agreement to the gospel message. We can understand we are separated from God by sin, admit we have sin, believe that Jesus died in our place for our sin, but that still doesn't give us eternal life.

What's troubling about this is that so many people still believe that they must do something themselves.

They must go to church.

They must keep religious rules and rituals.

They must belong to a Christian family.

They must be moral.

They must do good deeds.

When they do all this then they are automatically made right with God.

Here's what Paul said in **Philippians 3:9** **"I no longer count on my own goodness or my ability to obey God's law, but I trust Christ to save me. For God's way of making us right with Himself depends on faith."** (NLT)

Jesus announced some startling news in **Matthew 7:21-23** for anyone who relies on their personal

efforts to get into God's family is going to eventually experience eternity's worst nightmare.

"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.

Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?' Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from Me, you evildoers!'"

We need to be very clear with ourselves and with those we share the gospel with that a personal response is required. If you are unsure whether or not you have responded to the free, saving grace of God today is the day to make that certain.

B. We Must Ask Christ To Be Our Savior And Lord (Forgiver and Leader)

"All who call upon the name of the Lord will be saved." Acts 2:21

"Yet to all who received Him, to those who believed in His name, He gave the right to become the children of God." John 1:12

"That if you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved." Romans 10:9

That is our response. That is the only response. We must ask Christ to be our Savior and Lord. We must ask Him to forgive us and be the leader in our life from that time forward.

When that happens a change takes place.

C. We Have A Spiritual Transformation

Paul describes it to the Corinthians (**II Corinthians 5:17**) as becoming a new creation because the old has passed. We become new persons. The Bible

speaks about God's Spirit coming to live in us to affect the change that takes place and to be our leader in everyday living so that our character becomes like the character of God. This only happens as we yield ourselves to His control. We **“become a new person because the old life has gone and a new life has begun.” (NLT)**

As the Phillips translations stresses **“the past is finished and gone, everything has become fresh and new.”**

I cannot stress enough today to make certain that you have taken this step. Put your trust in Christ to forgive your sins and to lead your life. You may have gone to church all your life, but still be like the person standing in the airport terminal never getting on board the plane. Don't let fear or pride stand in the way of eternity. Admit your need for God who alone can forgive your sin and begin a new life in you.

As you pray for your list of unsaved friends and family, make sure they understand this. I hope you will be here in two weeks when we conclude this series on having a contagious faith. We will unwrap an illustration that can be helpful in diagraming how they can come to know Christ.

There are four key characters in this redemptive story – God, Us, Christ and You. By understanding each one we can improve our mastery in conveying the basic, but important message of salvation.

When we conclude in two weeks we will be looking at God's contagious love.

Let me conclude with Paul's words in **Colossians 4:3-6 “And pray for us, too, that God may open a door for our message, so that we may proclaim the mystery of Christ, for which I am in chains. Pray that I may proclaim it clearly, as I should. Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity. Let your**

conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone.”

May that be our prayer and desire in this coming week – to look for opportunities and then to clearly communicate the message of salvation through Christ who laid down His life for His friends.

Pray
Prepare
Proclaim

Bow with me as we commit ourselves to Christ.